

Lead Poisoning - What is it?

During 2004, the Memphis and Shelby County Health Department Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program reported 17,188 children were screened for lead poisoning throughout Memphis and Shelby County, and 2% (354) were found to have elevated blood lead levels. During this same period an average of 4.4% of children are lead poisoned nationwide.

Lead poisoning is a devastating disease. Children with very low levels of lead can develop poor reading skills, difficulty with basic math skills, behavior problems and attention deficit hyperactive disorder. Lead poisoning is a "silent" disease. It is called "silent" because symptoms are rarely seen until levels are very high and when brain damage has already occurred.

Low level symptoms are:

- > abdominal pain and cramping,
- > diarrhea,
- > constipation,
- > abnormal drowsiness, and
- > a decrease in play activity.

Physicians easily miss lead poisoning because symptoms mimic other diseases. The only way to know if a child has lead poisoning is a simple blood test.

Research shows that children with elevated blood lead levels are seven times more likely to drop out of school and six times more likely to have reading disabilities. It is estimated that it costs an average of \$10,000 more per year to educate a lead-poisoned child.

The primary cause of lead poisoning is exposure to lead in pre-1978 housing. *Almost all* houses built before 1950 have lead-based paint, and houses built prior to 1978 may have a lower level of lead-based paint. While some children eat paint chips, because of the sweet milk chocolate flavor, lead dust from windows and doorways is the primary cause of lead poisoning for most children. Children are exposed to lead from other sources, such as vinyl plastic mini-blinds, some parent occupations and hobbies, folk remedies and soil.

For more information from the Centers from Disease Control and Prevention, [click here](#).